The Next High

They are known as "designer drugs." Manufactured in clandestine laboratories from readily available chemicals, synthetic drugs can pack many times the wallop of cocaine and heroin, cost little to produce and are rarely detected in ordinary drug tests. Many experts fear that they may form the next drug epidemic.

A current favorite of college students is MDA, better known simply as "Ecstasy." Described as the LSD of the '80s, MDA offers the euphoric rush of cocaine and some of the mind-expanding qualities of hallucinogens without the scary, visual distortions. It may also cause permanent brain damage. Last year, the Drug Enforcement Administration outlawed MDA.

Heroin addicts on the West Coast are discovering slightly altered forms (known as analogs) of Fentanyl, an anesthetic widely used during prolonged surgery. One form, dubbed "China White," is 1,000 to 2,000 times as strong as heroin.

Since tiny quantities of synthetic drugs can supply a user's habit for days, one clandestine lab can split out as many drugs as a foreign country," says David Smith, director of the Haight-Ashbury Free Medical Clinic. Last year California lawmen raided 235 illegal drug factories, but they say that for every lab hit, three others were missed.

The underground labs do not have the most stringent quality controls. Four years ago a batched batch of a "designer" drug called MPTP, circulated through Northern California and left scores suffering from a frightening side effect: Parkinson's disease. If drugs like MPTP become as popular as cocaine, warns Jan Irwin, a San Jose neurotoxicologist, "you would have the makings of a real national disaster. It would make Chernobyl look minor."